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SOVIET AIRBORNE OPERATIONS

IN THEATER WAR

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IN THEATRE WAR

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SOVIET AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN THEATER WAR

GRAHAM H. TURBIVILLE, JR.

Introduction

➤ In July 1984, at a ceremony attended by numerous generals and officers of the Soviet Airborne Troop Headquarters' Staff, Airborne Troop Commander - in - Chief, Army General Dmitry S. Sukhorukov presented the Hero of the Soviet Union «Gold Star» medal and the Order of Lenin to an Airborne battalion coommander for «courage and heroism» displayed in Afghanistan. (1) This award to an airborne soldier for combat operations in Afghanistan is one of many earlier and subsequent presentations of military decorations made since Airborne Troops spearheaded the invasion of that country in the closing days of 1979. (2) Coming as the major's award did, on the eve of the 54th Anniversary of the Soviet Airborne Troops, it underscored the long - term and continuing Soviet commitment to airborne forces, a commitment that is striking both in terms of resource investment and in the development of innovative and demanding employment concepts. That is, Soviet military planners clearly think that airborne operations from small scale special purpose actions by lightly armed assault troops, to the large - scale strategic employ-

(1) *Krasnaya zvezda*, 11 July 1984, p. 4.

(2) See, for example, Moscow Domestic Service in Russian, 1315 GMT, 23 April 1985, as translated in Joint Publication Research Service (hereafter cited as JPRS), *USSR Report, Military Affairs* (hereafter cited as *URMA*), IPRS - UMA - 85 - 036, pp. 79 - 81, for an account of an Airborne Troop Guards Captain who received the «Gold Star» medal for heroism in the Panjsher Valley fighting in the spring of 1985. V. Filatov, «Lieutenant Colonel Kirznelsov's Stars» *Krasnaya zvezda*, 3 September 1983, presents an earlier account of an airborne unit commander who was also named a Hero of the Soviet Union for his actions in Afghanistan.

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Development of Soviet Airborne Troops

(4) V. Varennikov, «On the 90th Anniversary of the Birth of Marshal of the Soviet Union M.N. Tukhachevskii: Military Leader,» *Pravda*, 16 February 1983, p. 6, as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 83625, p. 54.

Army General Sukhorukov, puts it in regard to the work done in this period :

An outstanding achievement of Soviet military science in those years was the development of the deep offensive operation in which an important role was given to the airborne troops. It was believed that, in close coordination with mobile mechanized and cavalry *soyedineniye* and aviation, they were capable of pinning down, neutralizing and paralyzing enemy defenses, and depriving him of an opportunity to offer resistance and restore the situation by the use of reserves. As a result, the defenders will be forced to fight on two fronts at the same time at the most decisive moment of a battle or operation. ⁽⁵⁾

Under the leadership of Tukhachevskii and others, theory was translated into practice. Progress was rapid in enlarging the scope and complexity of airdrops and in better defining what missions airborne units might undertake. ⁽⁶⁾ The Soviet Union had, in fact, made substantial progress in developing concepts for airborne force employment by the start of World War II. When German forces attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the USSR was in the process of forming five airborne corps of about 10,000 men each. ⁽⁷⁾ The widespread destruction of transport aircraft, however, together with the need to concentrate on the production of fighters and bombers during the war, and the often pressing requirements for effective ground assault troops, severely limited the opportunities to employ airborne brigade, corps, and the later - organized divisions in an airborne role. Nevertheless, the Soviets claim to have conducted more than 50 airborne assault landings during the Second World War. ⁽⁸⁾

In regard to this World War II experience, airborne Major General Kostylev, echoing many other Soviet officers and military theorists, made a point that is fundamental to postwar airborne development. That is, that «the wealth of experience gained in the use of airborne

⁽⁵⁾ D.S. Sukhorukov, «In Combat Readiness,» *Voennii vestnik*, July 1980, p. 13.

⁽⁶⁾ See N. Ramanichev, «Development of Theory and Practice in the Combat Employment of Airborne Troops in the Interwar Period,» *Voenna-istoricheskii zhurnal*, October 1982, pp. 72 - 77 for an especially useful treatment of Soviet airborne developments from 1929 to 1941.

⁽⁷⁾ U. Krilov, «Winged Infantry,» *Soviet Military Review*, April 1981, p. 52.

⁽⁸⁾ V.F. Margelov, «Development of the Theory of Employment of Airborne Troops in the Postwar Period» *Voenna - istoricheskii zhurnal* (January 1977) : 54.

troops in the last war formed the basis for elaboration of theoretical views in the utilization of airborne troops in present-day operations.»⁽⁹⁾ However, The Soviets clearly faced many resource constraints in the first years following the war. Despite these constraints, new airborne divisions were formed «on the basis of infantry divisions,» and «rearmament of the airborne troops took place along with the organizational changes.»⁽¹⁰⁾ This rearmament included the introduction of new automatic rifles and machine guns, 85mm guns, more 120mm mortars, UAZ-67 and GAZ-67 1/4-ton utility vehicles to transport personnel and serve as gun prime movers, 122mm howitzers, antiaircraft, guns and other equipment.⁽¹¹⁾ Of particular note was the introduction in the 1950s of the ASU-57 airborne assault gun mounting a 57mm main gun and capable of transporting several paratroopers.

As regards air transport resources, only limited progress was made owing to a Soviet emphasis on creating long-range bomber aviation and air defense aircraft.⁽¹²⁾ Nevertheless, as resources became available, a number of aviation design bureaus undertook work on transport aircraft.⁽¹³⁾ The results of their efforts did not become apparent until the late 1950's, however, and Soviet transports in the first postwar period were limited to Li-2, IL-12s, and IL-14s - none of which could carry more than personnel and light infantry weapons.⁽¹⁴⁾

In the area of command, there was a development of some significance in the early postwar years. This was the assignment of future Commander-in-Chief (CINC) V. F. Margelov to the Airborne Troops as a division commander in 1948. As Airborne CINC, beginning some 6 years later, Margelov was to shape airborne development and employment concepts for twenty-five years.⁽¹⁵⁾ Margelo's assumption

⁽⁹⁾ V. Kostylev, «The Formation and Development of Airborne Troops,» *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* (September 1975): 83.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Margelov, «Development of the Theory,» p. 54.

⁽¹¹⁾ Ibid. and P. Pavlenko, «The Development of the Tactics of Airborne Troops in the Postwar Period,» *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* (January 1980), as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 75529, p. 32.

⁽¹²⁾ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Handbook on the Soviet Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 8-10.

⁽¹³⁾ John Stroud, *Soviet Transport Aircraft Since 1945* (New York: Funk and Wagnells, 1968), p. 33.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Pavlenko, «Development of the Tactics of Airborne Troops,» p. 31.

⁽¹⁵⁾ N. Liashchenko, «Army General Margelov (In Honor of His 70th Birthday),» *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* (December 1978), as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 72903.

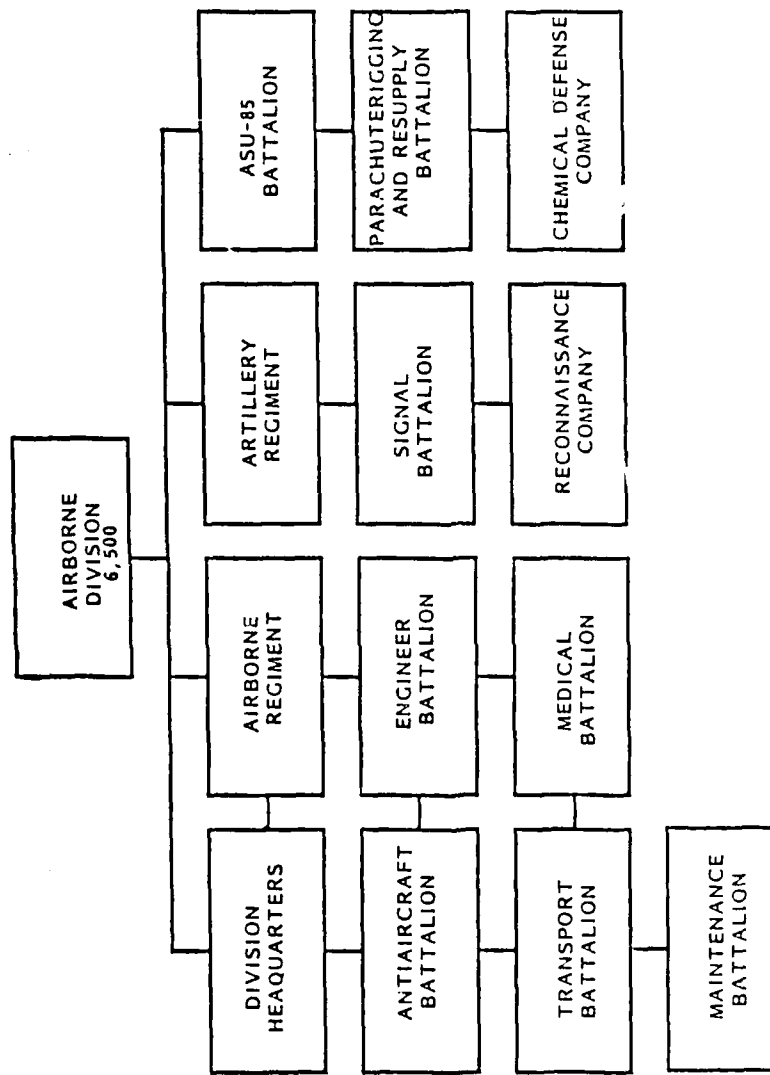


Figure 1
SOVIET AIRBORNE DIVISION ORGANIZATION

of Airborne Troops command in 1954, following Stalin's death and coinciding with an increasing availability of military resources and the beginning of attention to nuclear warfighting issues, produced substantial changes in Airborne Troop capabilities and approaches. While efforts to upgrade airborne equipment continued throughout the 1950s, a great deal of emphasis began to be placed on developing parachute delivery systems as well. Margelov noted that this emphasis resulted in «the creation and improvement of heavy-drop platforms, multi-canopy parachute systems, and new gliders, that made it possible to land virtually all types of combat equipment which were in the inventory of the airborne forces at that time.»⁽¹⁶⁾

In the area of air transport, Airborne Troops began their first experiments with helicopters in the 1950s. These included the Mi-4 capable of lifting 14 paratroopers, GAZ utility vehicles, or 76mm guns and the 20,000 pound capacity Mi-6, which just began to enter service in the 1950's but came to be closely associated with air assault operations later.⁽¹⁷⁾ The first truly notable achievement in Soviet efforts to develop a long range assault transport was the introduction of the Antonov AN-8, displayed on Soviet Aviation Day in 1956.⁽¹⁸⁾ It was equipped with a large rear-loading door and tail gun turret and was estimated to have a maximum speed of 350 miles per hour and a combat range of 2,000 miles. It was thought capable of carrying about 50 armed troops.⁽¹⁹⁾ This aircraft, together with older models, became part of the air transport fleet formerly called Aviation of Airborne Troops, but in 1955 redesignated Military Transport Aviation - an independent branch of the Soviet Air Force under the control of the Supreme High Command.⁽²⁰⁾

These growing Airborne Troop and airlift capabilities engendered changes in airborne employment concepts by the close of the 1950s.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Margelov, «Development of the Theory,» p. 55.

⁽¹⁷⁾ U.S. Department of the Army, *Handbook on the Soviet Army: Department of the Army Pamphlet no. 30-5-1* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1958), pp. 34-35, 222.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Ibid., p. 219 and Stroud, *Soviet Transport Aircraft*, p. 33.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Department of the Army, *Handbook on the Soviet Armed Forces*, p. 219.

⁽²⁰⁾ See Ibid., p. 213. P. Volpov, «Fifty Years of Military Transport Aviation,» *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* (May 1981), as translated in JPRS, URMA no. 79188, p. 79. While Military Transport Aviation (VTA) was given broader missions, «just as during World War II the principal mission of VTA is the dropping and landing of paratroop subunits deep in the enemy's defenses.» G. Pckilev, «The Wings of the Airborne Landing Force,» *Nash sovremennik*, February 1979, as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 73463, p. 84.

Airborne operations now become a more important component of frontal operations. Owing to greater firepower and tactical mobility, landed units were able to operate far more vigorously than had been the case earlier. Airborne missions were further defined in the 1950s as well. In general, it was reaffirmed that Airborne Troops would operate in support of frontal forces and with the Navy in amphibious assaults. In addition, it was judged that «in certain instances they could operate independently to benefit a strategic offensive.» ⁽²¹⁾ While strategic missions were at least becoming a theoretical possibility, Airborne Troop missions in this period focused on the tactical and operational employment of airborne forces to facilitate the attainment of objectives by frontal forces. In recognition of the growing importance of «atomic delivery systems,» tactical airborne forces were also assigned the mission of seizing or destroying these enemy resources. ⁽²²⁾ In general, however, it appears that the 1950s airborne role in nuclear operations differed little from nonnuclear employment options.

This changed by the early 1960s, however, certainly, as Margelov asserts, «the advent of nuclear missiles intensified the interest in airborne troops.» ⁽²³⁾ The «revolution in military affairs» brought about by the introduction of nuclear weapons and other technological advances that began to be recognized by Soviet planners in the 1950s, sprang full-blown in the 1960s. Soviet attention to fighting a nuclear war and the roles the various services and branches of Armed Forces were to play in such a conflict was reflected throughout military writings, exercises, and force structure developments. ⁽²⁴⁾

For the Airborne Troops, two important new pieces of equipment appeared by the mid-1960s. The first of these was the ASU-85 airborne assault gun mounting an 85mm main gun and 7.62mm coaxial machinegun. ⁽²⁵⁾ Intended for use in an antitank role as well as to provide other artillery support, the ASU-85 was also used to transport parat-

⁽²¹⁾ Margelov, «Development of the Theory,» p. 48.

⁽²²⁾ Department of the Army, *Handbook on the Soviet Armed Forces*, p. 34.

⁽²³⁾ V. Margelov, «The Airborne Troops,» *Soviet Military Review*, February 1966, pp. 20-21.

⁽²⁴⁾ See Notra Trulock, III, Phillip A. Peterson, and John Hines, «Soviet Perspectives on Modern War: Changing Views on Nuclear and Conventional Weapons,» April 1985, unpublished manuscript, for a thorough discussion of Soviet views in this regard.

⁽²⁵⁾ Friedrich Wiener and William J. Lewis, *The Warsaw Pact Armies* (Vienna: Carl Ueberreuter Publishers, 1977), p. 203.

roopers on the outside of its hull. The second item was the RPU-16 towed multiple rocket launcher, with sixteen 140mm tubes. ⁽²⁶⁾ Both items substantially increased airborne firepower. Of even more importance to the airborne's employment potential, however, was the introduction of the Antonov medium AN-12 assault transport in the early 1960's. The An-12, with a 1,400 kilometer range at maximum payload, mounting a tail gun turret for twin 23mm cannons, powered by four turboprop engines, and equipped with a large rear-loading door, can carry over 20 tons of cargo, or about 80 armed paratroopers. ⁽²⁷⁾ The AN-12 was to become the mainstay of Military Transport Aviation, comprising about 85 % of the force by the late 1970's. ⁽²⁸⁾ With its appearance, the possibilities for Airborne Troop employment expanded enormously, and it began to be used immediately in airborne exercises in the USSR and Eastern Europe.

This coinciding increase in capabilities-together with the critical examination of options for employing all Soviet forces in nuclear war-resulted in the wholehearted embrace of Airborne Troops as a means of rapidly exploiting nuclear strikes. That is, Airborne Troops would be able to reach deep objectives quickly in the wake of tactical, operational and strategic nuclear strikes to consolidate gains, prevent the enemy from establishing organized resistance against advancing friendly forces, and further demoralize enemy forces. Margelov describes the sequence this way :

First of all, there is a nuclear-missile strike from the ground, from under the surface of the water, from the air-a strike against a point or points on the territory of the enemy. Then follows the airborne troop landing in which subunits for all possible purposes participate. The paratroopers attack on the move and at any depth in the prescribed direction... Figuratively speaking, the paratroopers are the advance guard of the armed forces. Of course the missiles are ahead of us, but they are inanimate objects. ⁽²⁹⁾

In addition to engendering the need to introduce troops quickly into rear areas hit by nuclear weapons, these new weapons them-

⁽²⁶⁾ Ibid., p. 214.

⁽²⁷⁾ U.S. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 83.

⁽²⁸⁾ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Handbook on the Soviet Armed Forces*, pp. 10-14.

⁽²⁹⁾ Interview with V.F. Margelov conducted by E. Alekseev and E. Tserkovner, «Wings of the Guards», *Nedella*, no. 19, 30 April - 6 May 1967, p. 4.

selves facilitated the employment of airborne forces by their ability «to reliably lay the path for aircraft to the deep rear of the enemy and to overwhelm and destroy him in the regions of the landing...» ⁽³⁰⁾ Airborne Troops were then, regarded as a means of conducting deep attacks on the enemy in conjunction with nuclear strikes, as were naval landing forces and fast, mobile armored formations tasked to attack «remote objectives in a theater of military operation.» ⁽³¹⁾ While «strategic» operations by airborne forces were at least theoretically considered and occasionally addressed at this time, the emphasis remained clearly on tactical and operational level airborne landings.

Numerous quantitative and qualitative changes took place in the composition of Airborne Troops from the mid-1960s to the present. Together with the new approaches to waging war formulated and refined in this period, the potential and planning for widespread airborne operations changed fundamentally. Clearly, the most important change in terms of airborne equipment and armament was the introduction of the BMD airborne amphibious combat vehicles capable of being dropped by multi-parachute or parachuteretrocket system. The BMD was tested secretly at the 1970 Dvina maneuvers in the USSR, an indication that it must have been in development since at least the mid-1960's. ⁽³²⁾ It was first revealed for public display in the November 1973 military parade in Moscow honoring the 1917 October Revolution. ⁽³³⁾ The tracked, amphibious BMD-the basic variant-is armed with a 73 mm main gun, an antitank guided missile launcher (over the barrel or, more recently, on the turret), and three machine guns-two bow-mounted and one coaxial. It carries an airborne squad of seven men with room for one additional passenger and possesses a capability to raise and lower the hull from 100 to 450 millimeters. ⁽³⁴⁾ Initial assessments in the 1970s and early 1980s

⁽³⁰⁾ K. Andrukhov and V. Bulatnikov, «The Growing Role of Airborne Troops in Modern Military Operations,» *Voennaya misl*, no. 7, July 1966 FPIR 0475167, 17 May 1967, as presented in Joseph D. Douglass and Amoretta M. Hoeber eds., **Selected Readings from Military Thought, 1963 - 1973** (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 117.

⁽³¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁽³²⁾ Lieutenant Colonel K. Erhart, «Combat Machine of the Paratroopers,» *Armeerundschau*, May 1977, pp. 45-49. Translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 69454, pp. 58-60.

⁽³³⁾ *Ibid.*

⁽³⁴⁾ Colonel Iu. Burtsev, «The Airborne Combat Vehicle,» *Znamenosets*, September 1980, p. 12.

indicated that each airborne division had limited numbers of BMD's.⁽³⁵⁾ More recently, however, it has been determined that each airborne division possesses some BMDs, including the command variant first seen publicly in the invasion of Afghanistan, and perhaps the version mounting a longbarrelled gun of about 30mm.⁽³⁶⁾

The Soviets have been quite specific about the importance of the BMD. Writing in 1977 - before the full - scale introduction of the weapon throughout the division, Margelov noted how BMDs «greatly increased the maneuver capabilities of units on the battlefield and opened broad possibilities for the full mechanization of the force.»⁽³⁷⁾ Another Soviet author indicated that «essentially a new stage in development of the airborne troops began when the BMD-1 airborne assault combat vehicle became operational.»⁽³⁸⁾ That author's judgement that the Airborne Troops could no longer be called «winged infantry,» their old nickname, was echoed by current Airborne Troop CINC Sukhorukov, who stressed that the infantry were all mounted on vehicles, in addition to being armed with light weapons and supported by sophisticated heavy weapons.⁽³⁹⁾ While there are certainly innovations to come in Airborne Troop firepower, tactical mobility and support equipment, the airborne division today is clearly more comparable to a mechanized or light armored unit than to an infantry division. (See figure 1). The 8 airborne divisions (including one training division and a division deployed in Afghanistan) in the Soviet military establishment today constitute an air-transportable force of unprecedented capability.

Early in 1962, the Antonov Design Bureau was tasked with designing a large cargo aircraft capable of transporting loads far larger than any Soviet aircraft then in production. The aircraft also

(35) See Graham H. Hurbiville, Jr., «Soviet Airborne Troops,» In David R. Jones, ed., **Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual** (Gulf Breeze: Academic International Press, 1980), p. 263.

(36) Brusstar, **Soviet Airborne Forces**, p. 5, 26. This includes principally 11 per company, 35 per battalion, and about 110 per regiment.

(37) V. Margelov, «In Constant Combat Readiness,» *Voennii vestnik*, July 1977, p. 63.

(38) Liashchenko, «Army General V.F. Margelov,» pp. 71-72.

(39) Col. A. Danilov interview with Colonel General D.S. Sukhorukov, «Earth-Sky-Earth,» *Sovetskii voen*, no. 14, July 1980, as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 76546. Among the newest items of equipment introduced into airborne units is what the 1985 edition of **Soviet Military Power** (p. 68) termed a self-propelled «howitzer/mortar.»

had to be capable of transporting these loads over very long distances. The result of this effort was the four engine turboprop AN-22, which became known to the world when it was displayed at the 1965 Paris Air Show. The aircraft, featuring tail gun turret, rear loading cargo door, a maximum payload of about 88 tons, and a range (with maximum payload) of about 2,200 nautical miles, increased Soviet long-range lift capabilities enormously. ⁽⁴⁰⁾

Growing VTA inventories were further augmented in the 1970s by the addition of an Iliushin Design Bureau product. Designated the IL-76, this four-engine jet transport appeared first for public display in the 1971 Paris Air Show. By 1975, the aircraft clearly had been introduced into VTA inventories and was being used to drop paratroopers and heavy equipment in exercises. ⁽⁴¹⁾ The IL-76 can carry three BMDs (vice two for the AN-12), has a tail gun turret, large rear loading cargo door and two additional doors for parachutists, a range of 2,700 nautical miles carrying its maximum payload of 44 tons, and is currently replacing the less capable AN-12. Most recently, the Soviets are introducing their largest transport yet designed into operational inventories. This is the AN-124 which can lift an estimated 125 metric tons or 270 paratroopers some 3,400 kilometers. ⁽⁴²⁾

VTA lift, it should be stressed is regularly augmented by assets from the Soviet civil air fleet. The long-standing relationship between military and civil transport aviation has been well - documented. ⁽⁴³⁾ While the Ministry of Civil Aviation is not formally subordinate today to the Ministry of Defense, it is headed by a Marshal of Aviation and «in time of crisis the resources at the disposal of the civil Aeroflot could be mobilized immediately.» ⁽⁴⁴⁾ A number of other Aviation Ministry officials are active duty Air Force officers and «most civilian air crews serving with Aeroflot hold reserve military commissions.» ⁽⁴⁵⁾

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power* (1984), p. 83.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Graham H. Turberville, Jr., «Soviet Airborne Troops Training with IL-76 Candid», *Military Review* 61 (September 1967) : 31.

⁽⁴²⁾ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Force Structure Summary* (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, 1985), p. 20.

⁽⁴³⁾ See, for example, Kendall E. Bailes, «Soviet Civil Aviation and Modernization, 1923-1976», In Robin Higham and Jacob W. Klipp, eds., *Soviet Aviation and Air Power: A Historical View* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 167-194; Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power* (1984), p. 84; and Leslie Symons, «Aeroflot», In David R. Jones, ed., *Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual*, vol. 2 (Gulf Breeze: Academic International Press, 1978), pp. 227-238.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Symons, «Aeroflot», p. 237.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power* (1984), p. 84.

Soviet sources like retired Airborne Troop Lt. General Lisov frequently note that «a powerful reserve of our military transport aviation is the large number of aircraft of the Civil Air Fleet.» ⁽⁴⁶⁾ Overall, then, the resources of Aeroflot should be regarded as military assets-as they clearly are by the Soviets. While many Aeroflot aircraft would be suitable only for transporting personnel, and the military skills of Aeroflot crews uncertain, the AN-12s, AN-22s, and IL-76s, in Aeroflot inventories are potentially well-suited for at least the follow-up airlanding of airborne forces. The military employment of Aeroflot in wartime would, of course, free VTA resources from support tasks other than its primary mission— «the dropping and landing of paratroop subunits deep in the enemy defenses.» ⁽⁴⁷⁾

Finally, as regards airlift, there has been a proliferation of military helicopters used for a variety of roles from landing tactical assault forces to fire support. In addition to the older Mi-4 and Mi-6 mentioned earlier, the use of heavily armed Mi-8s to transport assault units and attack targets in landing zones, together with the several evolving models of the Mi-24 attack helicopter employed in close air support for ground force and air assault units (and also capable of carrying an infantry or airborne squad) has been widespread during this period. New combat helicopters have entered - or are entering - service as well (see figure 2). Notable among them is the new Mi-26 and Mi-28.

Overall, attention to formulating, examining, and refining airborne employment options-drawing on the lessons of the past-was intensive. To Soviet planners in the 1960s, Airborne Troops seemed ideally suited to their then-held vision on the nature of future «nuclear-rocket war.» From about the mid-1960s to the present, however, while still emphasizing the value of large airborne forces used in conjunction with tactical, operational and strategic nuclear strikes, Soviet planners began to develop-or in many cases reaffirm-concepts for Airborne Troop employment in operations without the use of nuclear weapons. These roles comprise a spectrum of missions varying in size, depth, target and purpose. Of special importance, is the mission now planned for large airborne forces to undertake deep strike operations of strategic significance in a theater offensive

⁽⁴⁶⁾ I.I. Lisov, (*Desantniki - vozdushnye desanti* (Parachutists - Airborne Landings) (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1968), p. 12.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Pakliev, «Wings of the Airborne Landing Force,» p. 84.

conducted without the use of nuclear weapons-a mission of considerable significance for Turkish defense considerations.

Contemporary Airborne Troop Employment Concepts and Missions

To provide a context for this examination of Airborne Troop missions and roles, it is necessary to bear in mind that assault landing operations are a component part of a strategic offensive in a continental TVD. This strategic offensive is conducted under the direction of a theater High Command, which controls subordinate land, air, and naval forces within a Theater of Military operations (TVD). The strategic offensive is supported by strategic assets from the Soviet Supreme High Command (VGK), and may comprise a number of operations (air, antiair, frontal, naval, airborne/amphibious, and, if required, strategic nuclear) coordinated and carried out in accord with a common plan. ⁽⁴⁸⁾

Airborne forces, it should be stressed, would be employed in conjunction with most of the component operations of the theater strategic offensive identified above-as well as independently-whether or not nuclear weapons were employed. Soviet planners today recognize four types of airborne assault missions: special purpose, tactical, operational, and strategic. While the kinds of actions they encompass have been in many cases envisioned theoretically for years, the newly acquired capability to implement them has been reflected in more careful definitions, rehearsal in exercises, and actual operational experience.

Looking first at special purpose missions, these operations are «used by the command element of operational formations to perform subversive or reconnaissance missions in the enemy's tactical or operational depth.» ⁽⁴⁹⁾ For example, airborne forces taking part in a special purpose mission may be tasked with locating and destroying enemy nuclear delivery systems or creating panic and confusion through the dissemination of false information. ⁽⁵⁰⁾ The participating units are to be small in size, ranging from a few highly trained individuals to perhaps company size. They would be delivered prin-

⁽⁴⁸⁾ See John G. Hines and Phillip A. Petersen, «The Soviet Conventional Offensive in Europe,» *Military Review* 61 (April 1984), p. 2-29, and Mr. Petersen's article in this journal.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ «Assault Landing,» *Sovetskaya voennaya entsiklopediya* (hereafter cited as SVE), vol. 3 (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1977), pp. 152-156.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p.

cipally by helicopter or light transport aircraft.⁽⁵¹⁾ Such missions would be associated closely with the air operation, and focused on locating and destroying NATO's nuclear delivery means and key command and control facilities.

Tactical airborne assault forces will clearly be the most widely employed airborne elements in a theater strategic operation, and are integral to frontal operations. Most often of company or battalion size, their missions will not greatly exceed 50 kilometers into enemy rear areas. Conducted most often in behalf of divisions and armies, the **Soviet Military Encyclopedia** indicates that tactical airborne missions may include «the capture and destruction of major objectives in the enemy's tactical and near operational depth, as well as nuclear weapons, control posts, and communications centers; the capture and destruction of area (lines) and objectives of tactical importance (road junctions, bridges, crossings, hydraulic structures, mountain passes, gaps, defilade positions, etc.), to assist the advancing troops in crossing natural barriers, interdicting the maneuvering of enemy troops, and ensuring a high rate of advance; the destruction of rear area bases, depots, and the demolition of pipelines, etc.»⁽⁵²⁾

While tactical landings are carried out still by parachute-delivered Airborne Troops, most often they will be performed by tailored, motorized rifle units drawn from frontal forces, or by army - level airmobile battalions or front - level air assault brigades delivered by helicopter. The latter two types of units were created in the 1970s specifically to perform tactical airborne assault landings by helicopter and - together with motorized rifle units - have largely relieved Airborne Troops of this role.⁽⁵³⁾ Tactical airborne assault operations have been rehearsed in countless exercises under a broad range of geographic and climatic conditions.

An operational - level airborne assault may be conducted to a depth of several hundred kilometers in support of army or front missions. Far larger than the tactical landing, it may comprise airborne forces of regimental size or greater, include substantial airlanded infantry elements, and be conducted jointly with naval

⁽⁵¹⁾ «Assault Landing.» **SVE**, p. 152.

⁽⁵²⁾ *Ibid.*

⁽⁵³⁾ For one treatment of Soviet approaches to heliborne assault operations see Graham H. Turbiville, Jr. «A Soviet View of Heliborne Assault Operations.» **Military Review** 55 (October 1975): 3-15.

infantry. More specifically, the Soviets say operational-level airborne assault landings may be carried out

...to destroy operational-tactical nuclear weapons and the most important control posts and installations in the enemy's near area; to interdict the approach of operational reserves and upset their organized entry into battle; to assist advancing troops in crossing large water barriers on the march, mountainous regions, and zones of radioactive contamination, as well as obstacles and flooded areas; to capture and put airfields and air bases out of operation; to assist advancing troops in encircling and destroying enemy troop groupings; and to capture islands, straits, ports, naval bases and sectors of coastline to further facilitate combat operations. ⁽⁵⁴⁾

An operational landing of division size was carried out during the 1970 Dvina maneuvers. In this exercise an airborne division (including a few-BMDs) were paratropped and airlanded by AN-12s and (for the first time) AN-22 transports. The paratroop phase, during which most of this large assault force was introduced, was carried out in 22 minutes. ⁽⁵⁵⁾ In the exercise scenario, the airborne division was dropped to prevent the advance of sizable enemy reserves that threatened the advance of a front in whose behalf the airborne force was operating. ⁽⁵⁶⁾

Planning for an operational assault landing is a complex undertaking. As one authoritative Soviet source has noted, «the preparations and landing of an operational assault force are planned and conducted in the same way as a strategic assault, with the men and equipment at the front (fleet) or army group level providing support for the troop operations.» ⁽⁵⁷⁾ This process will be discussed in more detail below, when strategic airborne assault operations are addressed.

Before discussing these aspects of strategic airborne operations, however, it is worthwhile first to say a word about evolving Soviet

⁽⁵⁴⁾ «Assault Landing,» SVE, p. 152.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Pakilev, «Wings of the Airborne Landing Force,» p. 84.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ See Graham H. Turbiville, Jr. «Soviet Airborne Troops,» *Military Review* 53 (April 1973); 67-68 for a more complete discussion of airborne exercises of the period. See also Richard Oden and Frank Steinert, «The Soviet Airborne Troops,» *Review of the Soviet Ground Forces*, March 1980, pp. 9-10.

⁽⁵⁷⁾ «Assault Landing,» SVE, p. 152. Emphasis added).

perspectives on airborne force employment. As noted earlier, the introduction of nuclear weapons had engendered a belief on the part of Soviet planners in the early mid 1960s that airborne forces would be employed most often in connection with nuclear strikes. By the mid-late 1960s, however, this perspective was clearly changing in regard to Airborne Troops, as it was for other forces. Soviet commentators at this time began noting how Airborne Troops would be widely used to conduct combat operations with conventional means of destruction.»⁽⁵⁸⁾ It must be emphasized, though, that Soviet airborne theorists remained convinced that the employment of Airborne Troops in conjunction with nuclear strikes was a principal employment option. Their utility in the older traditional roles, however, was receiving increased emphasis. While commentators like Margelov cited support of the ground forces as a major mission, new joint service and «independent» strategic missions were also being addressed. In 1966, for example, Soviet Defense Minister Malinovskii asserted that «Soviet paratroopers can emerge in the enemy rear area, having at their disposal all necessary combat equipment, including medium tanks, and are capable of fulfilling important strategic missions.»⁽⁵⁹⁾ Two years later, Margelov was still citing Malinovskii's statement (minus the less than forthright portion about medium tanks) with the strategic mission clearly of growing interest.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The 1967 airdrop of an entire airborne division (or more accurately their major elements) on two occasions in exercise **Dnieper** was conducted in a conventional scenario - illustration of the previous point.⁽⁶¹⁾ Certainly, the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia highlighted for Soviet planners the potential for large-scale Airborne Troop employment in both theater warfare and power projection roles. The Soviet airborne division which spearheaded this intervention was airlanded at Prague airport, and moved quickly to seize government buildings, broadcast facilities, and other key points around the Czechoslovak capital.⁽⁶²⁾

By the early 1970s, then, strategic airborne force missions were not only a recognized theoretical possibility, but the Soviets had demonstrated a capability to drop and land very large airborne forces

⁽⁵⁸⁾ As cited in Oden and Steinert, «The Soviet Airborne Troops,» p. 7.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ V. Margelov, «Attackers from the Sky,» *Krasnaya zvezda*, 20 February 1968.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Turbiville, «Soviet Airborne Troops,» (*Military Review* - 1973) pp. 66-67.

⁽⁶²⁾ See, for example, Aleksei Myagkov, «Soviet Sabotage Training for World War II,» *Soviet Analyst*, 20 December 1979, pp. 2-4 and Robert Jackson, *The Red Falcons: The Soviet Air Force in Action, 1919-1969* (Brighton: Clifton Books, 1970), pp. 198-209.

in a short period of time. In addition, Soviet planners had clearly been considering the employment of strategic airborne landings as a means of conducting strategic deep strikes when nuclear weapons could not be employed, or after conventional fire preparation. For example, exercise *Yug* in 1971 highlighted again the mass employment of paratroopers to achieve major objectives in an area where nuclear weapons were apparently not employed. An airborne division was dropped or airdropped at a captured airfield «within half an hour,» and almost certainly was tasked to link up with naval infantry landed on the Black Sea coast that same day. ⁽⁶³⁾ The classification of the airborne division's mission was not specified in the Soviet media, though it seems clearly to have been a strategic mission carried out to take major objectives in a coastal area. An airborne/amphibious operation of this magnitude is clearly consistent with the assault landings that may be directed against the Turkish straits.

Subsequent Soviet exercises throughout the 1970s and 1980s have often featured airborne force employment in a context where nuclear weapons played no-or no direct-role. Overall, Soviet Airborne Troop employment concepts and training had come to incorporate major roles in nuclear and nonnuclear operations, with increasing emphasis on the mass-and smaller scale-employment of airborne forces in a conventional environment. Wide recognition was given to an airborne «strategic» or «independent» mission, and the designation of airborne operations as a component part of the theater strategic offensive pointed to the large-scale employment of the force in one or more Airborne Troop assaults to achieve operational or strategic objectives. It is important to consider in this regard, what kinds of strategic airborne assaults Soviet planners may envision in a theater strategic offensive and how such an assault may be planned and conducted.

Looking first at what Soviet writings identify today as strategic assault missions, it is emphasized that this would be a combined arms operation potentially involving «men and equipment from all the armed services...» ⁽⁶⁴⁾ A strategic airborne assault may be employed «in strategic operations» to :

⁽⁶³⁾ M. Loshchits, «An Airborne Assault Landing,» *Krasnaya zvezda*, 16 June 1971, and Turblville, «Soviet Airborne Troops,» pp. 68-69.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ «Assault Landing,» *SVE*, p. 152. Joint airborne/amphibious operations are of particular significance. See Charles Pritchard, «Warsaw Pact Amphibious Forces and the Turkish Straits,» in this journal for a close look at the amphibious component of such operations.

- Capture major administrative - political and industrial - economic centers;
- Destroy military and civil control;
- Seize straits and islands; 18
- Assist **frontal** forces and naval forces in isolating and rapidly destroying large enemy groupings;
- Invade enemy territory to open a new front; and
- Take individual states of an enemy coalition out of the war. ⁽⁶⁵⁾

Soviet authors have pointed to the historical precedent of airborne operations which accomplished operational-strategic goals «independently». For example, airborne forces are judged to have been instrumental in the quick capitulation of Holland, Belgium, and Norway in World War II, and, of course, in the seizure of the island of Crete—undertakings which fall into the Soviet categorization of strategic missions. ⁽⁶⁶⁾ Certainly, the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the landing of at least one BMD' equipped airborne division in Kabul and other Afghan locations during the 1979 invasion of that neighboring nation, constitute strategic missions as well.

The level of command that may control an airborne assault force conducting a strategic mission was addressed publicly as long ago as 1967. In an article in the Soviet restricted journal **Military Thought**, the authors stressed the need for centralized planning and command, since so many different elements were brought together in executing a large airborne operation. ⁽⁶⁷⁾ They concluded that «in carrying out a mass landing operation... such centralized planning of the attack operations, or, perhaps, of their main problems, it seems to us, is possible on the level of the theater of military operations.» ⁽⁶⁸⁾ Looking back at World War II, Soviet airborne Colonel (Ret) Samoilenko noted that Airborne Troop units, as tools of the Supreme High Command, could be allocated to **front** commanders «or used in a centralized

⁽⁶⁵⁾ «Assault Landing», SVE, p. 152.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ See, for example, Lisov *Desantniki*, p. 231, and D. Sukhorukov «Conclusions from the Experience of Airborne Landings in World War II» *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* (July 1981): 67-74, as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 79225, p. 72.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ Andruklov and Bulatnikov, «Growing Role of Airborne Troops» p. 123.

⁽⁶⁸⁾ *Ibid.*

manner under the direct command of the VDV commander.» ⁽⁶⁹⁾ The Airborne Troop CINC and his staff in conjunction with VTA and other force elements (whose actions would have to be coordinated by the General Staff), would be integral to formulating and planning the operation. As suggested in the 1967 Military Thought article, and in light of the probable setting up of High Commands in at least some continental theaters, it is possible that a substantial airborne force assigned to conduct a strategic assault landing in a theater-strategic offensive would be allocated to the High Command CINC in the given theater. This would facilitate the planning and coordination of actions for all participating theater forces. In any event, it seems likely that a strategic airborne operation that is a component of a theater strategic offensive would be controlled by the TVD High Command or the VGK/General Staff (perhaps with the Airborne Troop CINC or his deputy serving as the operational commander of the assault forces.)

Recently available information-lecture materials from the Voroshilov General Staff Academy in Moscow has provided additional details on how the USSR would coordinate, plan, and execute a large-scale airborne assault capable of accomplishing major operational or strategic missions. These lecture materials do not present views, judgements, or concepts that differ from data presented in open writings and other media. Rather, by providing additional detail, they fill out concepts and approaches addressed in Soviet books, monographs, and journals. Drawing on these materials, then, as a supplement to other sources, substantial insight can be gained into how the USSR would undertake a large-scale airborne operation.

First of all, Soviet planners recognize both the long-standing and more recently developing difficulties of conducting major air assault operations. They cite for example, the increasingly sophisticated air defense environment through which vulnerable transport aircraft must fly. Margelov noted the following in 1967, a judgement that Sukhorukov has echoed:

Gaining complete air superiority and a high assurance that enemy air defense capabilities would be neutralized within the flight zone and drop zone areas was the governing requirement in the years of World War II. Now, its

⁽⁶⁹⁾ Ia. Samoilenko, «From the Experience of Controlling Airborne Landings During the War» *Voenno-Istoricheskii zhurnal* (December 1979) as translated in JPRS, URMA, no. 75400, p. 21.

significance has been increased many times over, in-as-much as modern armies possess a strong air defense capability, which includes fighter aviation, antiaircraft artillery, ZURS systems, surface-to-air missiles (which include nuclear warheads) and multibranch electronics surveillance systems. ⁽⁷⁰⁾

Margelov went on to note that modern air defenses were deeply echeloned, maneuverable, and capable of sending up multilayered fire along the most important air corridors. Also cited by Soviet planners are the substantial coordination and command and control problems associated with a mass airdrop, the danger that an assault force may be overwhelmed by enemy forces and fire at drop zones which had not been properly reconnoitered or prepared by friendly fire strikes, and need to have an assault force rapidly dropped, assembled, and ready to defend itself. Too, though Soviet sources do not address the issue directly, there are clearly competing demands for military transport aviation that will limit the scale and number of airborne operations-a problem that would become more acute as VTA resources suffered wartime attrition.

Recognizing the problems outlined above as well as a myriad of other issues, Soviet approaches to planning a large airborne operation are extraordinarily thorough. Since such high value resources are involved, the number of large-scale assaults which could be undertaken limited, and the potential impact of such an operation the course of the offensive decisive so great, the concept of the assault and the general parameters are first specified by a directive from the Supreme High Command. ⁽⁷¹⁾ Detailed planning is then accomplished by depending upon the circumstances of the drop-the Soviet General Staff (which must coordinate the planning across branches and services); the commander and staff of the High Command in the given TVD; VTA and Airborne Troop Headquarters; the Air Force Commander and strategic aviation elements; Air Defense Troops; naval elements to include naval aviation; and the affected **frontal** force commanders and staffs. ⁽⁷²⁾ It is probable that some large - scale airborne

⁽⁷⁰⁾ Margelov, «Airborne Forces.» p. 8.

⁽⁷¹⁾ Lecture materials from the Voroshilov General Staff Academy, «Employment of Military Transport Aircraft to Land an Airborne Division in the Rear of the Enemy.» (Hereafter cited as «Lecture Materials-Airborne.»), Sukhorukov, «Conclusions from the Experience of Controlling Airborne Landings.» p. 21.

⁽⁷²⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne.» p. 7 and Samollenko, «From the Experience of Controlling Airborne Landings.» p. 21.

assault operations are planned in peacetime in accord with wartime contingencies, an accomplishment that would give planners the option of carrying out a large assault in the earliest days of a conflict. ⁽⁷³⁾

Upon being alerted to participate in an airborne operation, airborne divisions depart their garrisons by road or rail and move first to staging areas, and then to concealed waiting areas some 5-10 kilometers from departure airfields. Simultaneously, VTA transports move to their dispersed airfields. ⁽⁷⁴⁾ Considerable emphasis is placed on dispersal, concealment, attention to communications security, night movement, and limited stays in single locations. ⁽⁷⁵⁾ Soviet planning norms presented in the Voroshilov materials indicate that for alerting airborne and transport forces, establishing command and control links, loading troops, and completing final takeoff preparations, some 25-27 hours are required (or much less if prior notice of the alert had been given). ⁽⁷⁶⁾ Soviet capabilities to meet this and other norms are, of course, open to critical examination.

Transport aircraft carrying an airborne division would approach their objectives-prepared by aviation and other fire strikes-along neutralized air corridors. Current Soviet approaches are designed to focus heavy resources on creating safe air corridors. Enemy air defenses, to include aircraft on airfields, SAMs, AAA, radars, and command and control facilities would be destroyed by a variety of systems to include frontal tactical and operational-tactical missiles and artillery, fighter bomber aircraft of the front and the long-range aviation assets of the Supreme High Command and Naval Aviation. Radio-electronic warfare efforts would be intensive from departure to return, and aimed in large measure at jamming or deceiving enemy SAM and fighter radars and air defense communications means. ⁽⁷⁷⁾ It is clear that these measures could be most effectively carried out during the air operation early in the theater strategic offensive. This suggests that the introduction of a large airborne assault force would take place early in the operation.

The airdrop of an airborne division would require at least 3-6 drop zones (one or two per regiment), each about 3 by 4 kilometers

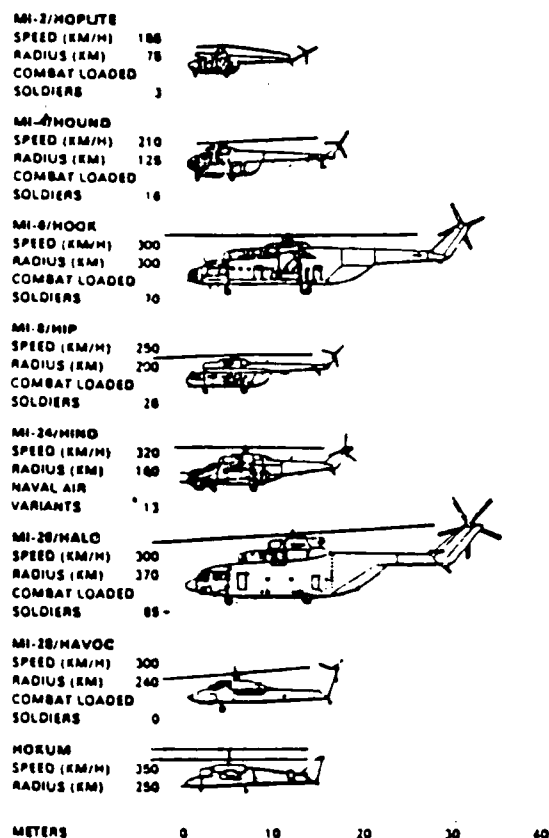
⁽⁷³⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne.» p. 6.

⁽⁷⁴⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne.» pp. 22-25.

⁽⁷⁵⁾ Lisov, «Desantniki» p. 267, and «Lecture Materials-Airborne.» pp. 20-21, 22-24.

⁽⁷⁶⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne.» pp. 9-10.

⁽⁷⁷⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne.» pp. 17-18.



Force Level

Mi-2/HOPLITE	740
Mi-4/HOUND	20
Mi-6/HOOK	450
Mi-8/HIP	1,750
Mi-24/HIND	1,125
Mi-26/HALO	10
Mi-28/HAVOC*	0
HOKUM*	0
Total	4,095[†]

* Still in development

† Includes 120 HIP E and 830 HIND D E gunship helicopters

Figure 2
COMBAT AND SUPPORT HELICOPTERS

Source «Force Structure Summary»

in size. ⁽⁷⁸⁾ More numerous, smaller drop zones for battalions or companies may also be used. The initial approach to the drop zones would be made by transports comprising what the Soviets call a support group would consist of reconnaissance aircraft to ensure that substantial enemy forces had not moved into the area, and other transports which would drop the pathfinder and landing control teams-also called in Soviet sources a seizure group. ⁽⁷⁹⁾ These teams arrive about 20-25 minutes before the main assault group; set up radio beacons; establish communications with incoming transports; and set up defense positions. ⁽⁸⁰⁾ They may be up to about a company in strength for each large drop zone. ⁽⁸¹⁾

The main body of the assault force is then dropped at an altitude of from 150-300 meters with use made of both multi-parachute and parachute-retrorocket braking systems for the airdrop of heavy equipment. Vehicle and weapon crews will locate and prepare their equipment, squads will assemble, and the units-upon achieving company and battalion integrity-will seize or destroy targets contributing to the accomplishment of the overall strategic airborne mission. Soviet planning norms indicate that a daytime regimental drop should require about 25 minutes and over three times that long for a night drop. ⁽⁸²⁾ Thus, a daytime drop of a division size force, using multiple drop zones, could perhaps be carried out in about half an hour. It will be recalled that this was claimed by the Soviets in exercises *Dnieper*, *Dvina*, and *Yug*. It is virtually certain that in a large airborne assault operation, airfields would be seized, thus facilitating resupply and also allowing for the reinforcement by airborne or tailored motorized infantry units-a potential often mentioned in Soviet writings and demonstrated in exercises.

Conclusions

That Soviet planners and theorists remain committed to the concept of vertical envelopment to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic missions in the course of a theater strategic offensive is undeniable. The Soviets have devoted more than fifty-five years to the development of employment approaches, with many of the early

⁽⁷⁸⁾ Brusstar, *The Soviet Airborne Forces*, p. 13.

⁽⁷⁹⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne,» pp. 27-29.

⁽⁸⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁽⁸¹⁾ Brusstar, «*The Soviet Airborne Forces*,» p. 14.

⁽⁸²⁾ «Lecture Materials-Airborne,» p. 27.

ideas of theorists like Tukhachevskii appearing as relevant today as they were farsighted in the 1920s and 1930s. Building on these prewar theories, early exercises, and experiments, carefully studying the lessons of World War II (both Soviet and foreign) and incorporating these lessons and approaches into the new operational concepts and potential engendered by postwar developments in weapons systems, equipment, and technology. Soviet planners today have concluded that airborne force employment has become essential for the conduct of modern offensive operations-with or without the use of nuclear weapons. Accompanying theoretical and doctrinal development has been an investment in airborne and airlift resources that has made the widespread employment of airborne assault operations a reality.

Clearly, the Soviets believe that the employment of airborne forces to accomplish strategic missions has the potential of decisively influencing the conduct of a theater strategic operation. Soviet planners have identified generic types of targets-such as islands and straits-that they believe constitute ideal objectives for large airborne units operating jointly with amphibious forces. Thus, the recognized strategic importance of the Turkish straits-vital to Soviet operations against Turkey, NATO's Southern Flank as a whole, and of even broader global significance as well-point to the likely employment of large Soviet airborne forces early in a NATO/Warsaw Pact conflict to secure these critical Turkish objectives.

Soviet capabilities to execute such a large and complex operation are, of course, arguable. Soviet planners, themselves, well-recognize the vulnerabilities of an airborne operation in the face of determined and effective defending forces. However, given evidence from doctrinal writings, airborne force employment in exercises, and the importance of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to any Soviet operations in the region, it seems likely that Soviet planners will commit these high value resources in an effort to secure the straits and substantially advance their attainment of overall theater and wartime objectives. As a consequence, evolving Soviet airborne operational concepts and capabilities deserve careful and continuing attention from NATO defense planners, with conclusions drawn from these assessments translated into appropriate countermeasures.